

Israeli lawmakers advance legislation banning use of 'Nazi' symbols

Bills have the approval of the coalition, but have prompted sharp criticism by human rights groups who claim they violate free speech.

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The Nazi swastika flag in Germany, Sept. 1939.

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The Knesset gave its preliminary approval Wednesday to a series of controversial bills that would outlaw the use of the term "Nazi" as an epithet and the wearing of the Holocaust-era yellow star that the Nazis required Jews to wear.

The bills have the [approval of the coalition](#), but have prompted sharp criticism by human rights groups who claim they violate free speech.

The Knesset vote follows a demonstration by ultra-Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem last week in which they wore yellow stars and dressed several children in concentration camp garb in an effort to protest what they saw as the victimization of their community. The backlash against the Haredim followed an outcry over women being forced to sit at the back of the bus on certain public bus lines that run through Haredi neighborhoods.

The proposed legislation would outlaw the public use of the term "Nazi" in all its forms as an epithet in connection with Nazism and would also include words that sound like the term "Nazi." The legislation would bar the wearing of the striped garb that concentration camp inmates wore during World War II and

would ban depictions of the swastika or any other item clearly connected to Nazism. If the proposed legislation passes, violators would be subject to up to six months in prison and a NIS 100,000 fine.

After legislation on the subject was proposed by Uri Ariel of the National Union, other MKs followed suit with their own similar bills. During the Knesset debate yesterday, Zevulun Orlev (Habayit Hayehudi) denounced what he called the intolerable ease with which Nazi symbols have been used in public discourse in a manner that demonstrates insensitivity to Holocaust survivors and their descendents. It was particularly important, he said, that the Jewish state, which should be in the forefront of efforts to perpetuate the memory of the Holocaust and combat Holocaust denial, address the issue.

"There is an argument that this law would do harm to freedom of expression," Ariel said in reference to his proposed law. "Every society has its limits," he said, adding that when it comes to symbols of the Holocaust, there is a consensus among 90 percent of the Israeli public that such use of Holocaust symbols is beyond what is acceptable. For his part, however, MK Dov Khenin of Hadash roundly condemned the proposed legislation.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel also decried the provisions, calling it "very serious," precisely due to the centrality of the Holocaust, that legislation would seek to dictate when and in what context reference could be made to the Holocaust. "Freedom of expression is the right to say difficult, sharp and even hurtful things. It's the right to give crude and extreme expression to positions, feelings and thoughts and includes the right to make rhetorical use of difficult and provocative images," the group said in a statement.

The legitimacy of the use of Holocaust symbols in public discourse is worthy of free debate, ACRI said, but should not be addressed through the criminal code.

By: HAARETZ

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